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Many readers will be familiar with George Chryssides’ research on New Religious Movements (NRMs), which is broad ranging but especially focuses on the methodology of studying NRMs and on Jehovah’s Witnesses (an “old” NRM). This is his third book on Witnesses and follows his reference work Historical Dictionary of Jehovah’s Witnesses (2008, second edition 2019) and monograph Jehovah’s Witnesses: Continuity and Change (2016). These established Chryssides as a leading scholar of this Christian community. Jehovah’s Witnesses have their origins in Allegheny City, Pennsylvania, in the 1870s, when Charles Taze Russell and the Bible Students (as they became known) turned to scripture to reveal Bible truths they believed were obscured by the mainstream Christian churches. In 2021, there were almost 9 million members worldwide.

Jehovah’s Witnesses: A New Introduction differs from Chryssides’ previous books in two key respects. First, the intended audience. The book is not written for specialists but for the general reader, and as such is one of very few balanced and informed works aimed at this audience. Second, it examines the practice of being a Witness. Chryssides explains: “This book’s focus is on what it means to be a Jehovah’s Witness...” (p. 125). It outlines how Witness beliefs and practices shape their lifestyle, weekly routines, sense of belonging, and the way they operate within and relate to the secular world, from interacting with non-Witness colleagues to fulfilling their civic duties.

Jehovah’s Witnesses thus departs from the overwhelming majority of publications on this community, which are mostly authored by self-styled “anti-cult” activists seeking to counter Witness theology or ex-Witnesses telling their stories, usually of painful extraction or expulsion from the community. It is easy for the general reader seeking information on Witnesses to rely on these publications, but this accessible, affordable paperback will provide them with an introduction which strives to be balanced and analytical. Chryssides raises some interesting

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questions, especially about life after Armageddon: How does the Governing Body (which determines doctrine for Witnesses worldwide) explain why only 144,000 belong to the anointed class that will rule with Christ in Heaven? It is difficult to reconcile that number with those seemingly eligible, and this gets more difficult as time passes. What happens to blended families after Armageddon? If a Witness is widowed and remarries, for instance, will he have both wives in the earthly paradise? What language (or languages) will be spoken there? And where do animals fit in: Can they attain salvation, or are they merely food? As Chryssides points out, depictions of the earthly paradise show Witnesses working an earth abundant with fruits and vegetables, never eating meat, butchering animals or even fishing. These questions may not have occurred to veteran researchers of this community but may seem obvious to those approaching it with fresh eyes.

For specialists, this book might not present new content. Nonetheless, it raises questions about our approach to Jehovah’s Witnesses and the state of the field (which Chryssides calls “Watch Tower Studies,” p. 4). Chryssides has been researching Witnesses for decades and has good links with the community, from his local Kingdom Hall in the English Midlands to the worldwide headquarters in upstate New York. In his past work, Chryssides has examined the insider/outsider dichotomy and found it wanting (most notably in a book co-edited with Stephen E. Gregg, The Insider/Outsider Debate: New Perspectives in the Study of Religion). These diametrically opposed categories certainly need nuancing; there are many shades of what might be deemed “outsider,” just as there are many of “insider.” In the preface to Jehovah’s Witnesses: A New Introduction, Chryssides considers his position in relation to his research subjects and suggests that ‘guest’ might be a good term: he is not at home within or accepted as part of the Witness community but is knowledgeable about its practices and welcomed within it, even though he is categorically not a member. His reflections on the limitations and advantages of this approach are thought provoking and have methodological implications.

Some of the recent work on Witnesses has focused on the continuities (or lack thereof) in the beliefs and practices of the Bible Students of Russell’s time and Witnesses of today. Counter-intuitively perhaps, I see strong continuities even when it comes to the “electronics revolution” (p. 36) Chryssides describes. One example is the new “No Blood” smart phone app. This might seem a significant change resulting from the “electronics revolution.” However, the instruction is the same and
the look is the same—it just is carried on a small, handheld device rather than a physical card in a wallet or purse. A new Bible study aid for Witnesses, entitled Enjoy Life Forever, contains links to videos, hyperlinks, and interactive elements, but retains its basic instructional function (and is described by the organisation as a textbook). This raises the question: How much is this Russell’s organisation? Would he recognise Jehovah’s Witnesses as the descendants of Bible Students? The real revolution might be located in the Rutherford era (1917–1942), with the introduction of the theocratic system of government, or in the Knorr era (1942–1977), with its emphasis on preparing Witnesses for public ministry, rather than the IT developments of recent decades.

Readers looking for an in-depth analysis of Jehovah’s Witnesses’ beliefs and practices would be better served by one of Chryssides’ previous books or by my monograph Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Secular World: From the 1870s to the Present (2018). Nonetheless, Chryssides’ most recent work is an important introduction to Witnesses which will go a long way towards correcting common misconceptions about the community for the general reader. It is accessible and reasonably priced, and will reach those who might otherwise pick up one of the countless books designed to counter Witness theology and practices rather than explain and contextualize them.